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WOMEN AT FULLER:
A HISTORY

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Fuller Seminary has welcomed women throughout its history. As a school originally founded to educate men only, however, that welcome came in ever-broadening stages over its first two decades.

When the seminary held its first classes in 1947, the faculty rejected a request to open those classes to women. But seminary wives promptly created their own two organizations: the Philothean Fellowship, which gathered for prayer, Bible study, fellowship, and service, and the Women's Auxiliary, which rallied support, raised money, and distributed scholarships to students in need. One of the first agenda items for the Philotheans was asking again, in the spring of 1948, that classes be opened for credit to qualified student wives. This time, the faculty granted their request. As of the next year, 1949, any qualified woman applicant could attend specific courses, not just seminary wives.

Although they were now able to take classes for credit, women were still not allowed to earn degrees. Fuller's only degree program at the time, the Bachelor of Divinity—or BD, the equivalent of today's Master of Divinity—required students to take preaching courses, and the seminary's theological position did not yet support women in pastoral ministry. Additionally, the BD degree in 1949–50 required students to take a set program of courses over a structured three-year period; no course substitutions were available. This structured approach was challenged when a highly qualified prospective student, Helen (Holly) Clark, pressed for admission to Fuller's Bachelor of Divinity program in 1949. Many faculty were supportive of her inclusion, but some objected that her admission would condone women in pastoral ministry, which was still not widely accepted. After much discussion,

the faculty decided to create a new degree in 1950, the Bachelor of Sacred Theology (STB), similar to the BD but substituting Christian education electives for the preaching courses. Clark enrolled and, earning her STB in Spring 1952, was the first woman to graduate from Fuller.

The STB's creation revealed the need for a full-time instructor in Christian education to support women pursuing work as church staff members, and in Fall 1952 Rebecca Price was hired, as Fuller's first female faculty member, to fill that role. Dr. Price established, directed, and taught a second new degree created primarily for women, the Master of Religious Education (MRE)—a two-year program that drew more women to the seminary, and from which the first students graduated in 1954.

The next decade saw increasing numbers of women coming to Fuller—and a gradually increasing embrace of their equality as students. By 1966, women were accepted into all the degree programs Fuller then offered: the Bachelor of Divinity, Doctor of Pastoral Theology, Master of Religious Education, Master of Theology, Doctor of Theology, and, in the newly established School of Psychology and School of Mission, the PhD in Clinical Psychology and Master of Arts in Missions. The Bachelor of Sacred Theology was discontinued. As stated in the 1966 course catalog: "Fuller Seminary welcomes women students, who may enroll for any of the degrees offered." Lucille Lynch Carr was the first woman to receive the MA in Missions degree, in 1966, and Patricia Harrison the first to receive the BD degree, in 1969.

The 1970s saw several more "firsts" for women at Fuller. In 1971 and 1972, respectively, Pearl McNeil

and Joyce Penido were the first women invited to serve on the Board of Trustees. In 1974, Gail Toycen Weyerhaeuser was the first female president of All Seminary Council, and Edie Munger the first woman to earn her PhD in Psychology. In 1972 the Bachelor of Divinity became the Master of Divinity, and in 1975 the first two women to receive an MDiv were Lucinda Gorman and Marguerite Shuster. Roberta Hestenes, joining Fuller in 1974 as adjunct professor in communication and educational ministries, initiated a series of new courses focusing on women, and the following year edited a special issue of *Theology, News & Notes* on the theme “Women in Transition.” Read that special issue [here](#).

The numbers of female graduates through the first half of the 1970s was still quite low, however, and women felt the seminary could do more to support them. This led to a two-day “sit-in” at the office of Provost Glenn Barker in April 1976, where six women called for a new office that would advocate for female students. From their efforts and the strong support of Roberta Hestenes was born the Office of Women Concerns, launched in August 1976 with Libbie Patterson at its helm. That year also saw Hendrika Vande Kemp joining the School of Psychology as the seminary’s first tenure-track female faculty member. From that time on, the numbers of female graduates across Fuller’s programs continued to steadily increase, as did the numbers of female professors. Dr. Hestenes became the first woman to achieve tenure in the School of Theology.

Another demonstration of Fuller’s support for women came in 1978, when the seminary joined the Evangelical Women’s Caucus to cosponsor and host a conference on “Women and Ministries of Christ,” drawing over 800 women from around the world. In 1983 Fuller’s Statement of Faith was revised to reflect more inclusive language—followed by “Suggestions for Using Nondiscriminatory Language” by Fran Hiebert, then-director of the Office of Women’s Concerns, in 1984. In 1990, the “Policies Governing the Use of Nondiscriminatory Language,” with accompanying guidelines, were formally approved by Fuller’s faculty and board.

“We made it clear that women are welcome, and they showed up,” said the late trustee Max De Pree about Fuller’s early years. “That was a great message to the church. If you were a woman and you felt called to ministry, you could go to Fuller.” It was a message backed by statistics—in particular a survey conducted in 1982 by sociologist James Davison Hunter. He called it “The Evangelical Academic Project,” a comparative study of evangelical trends amongst academic institutions. Hunter found that 80% of Fuller respondents favored ordination of women to the ministry as opposed to 42% at comparable seminaries. Also, just 15% of Fuller respondents opposed the ordination of women as compared with 48% at other seminaries.

Those percentages have only improved in the many years since. For decades now, the seminary’s doors have been fully open to women. Approximately one-third of Fuller’s current faculty are women—compared with 22 percent at similar institutions—and 40 percent of the seminary’s students are women. Two deans and a provost in recent years have been women. As the seminary’s institutional commitment now reads, in part:

Fuller welcomes women equally into all its programs, and the seminary is committed to making its resources fully available to women as they pursue the professions and ministries to which the Lord has called them. All who teach and study in Fuller’s programs are expected to honor this commitment: under no condition may the authority of the classroom be used to challenge the calling of any student on the basis of gender. Click [here](#) to read this institutional commitment in full.

¹James Davison Hunter, *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation* (University of Chicago Press, 1987). Hunter and Fuller Seminary released the statistics related to Fuller Seminary for publication in George Marsden’s book *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 308.

²The Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada, Commission on Accrediting, [Annual Data Tables 2017–18](#), Table 3.1-A, “Number of Full-Time Faculty by Race/Ethnicity, Rank, and Gender—All Schools,” and Graph 3D, “Full-Time Faculty by Gender as Percentage of Total Full-Time Faculty in All Member Schools.”